Standards and Accreditation in Educational Practice

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Introduction

Program evaluation is a term which has been bantered around a great deal in recent years. While there is much talk, there is little agreement about what the concept really means; there is agreement that it should be done but little agreement about how. Anderson, et al. (1975) identify eight characteristics of program evaluation on which there is wide although not universal agreement: provides decision making information; should be useful for program improvement decisions; should be completed prior to making decisions; involves a human judgmental process following program evaluation; should consider long- and short-term objectives; should consider incidental input and output variables; the model or design should be multivariate; and data collection should conform to accepted standards, including validity, reliability and ethical responsibility.

The current emphasis on program evaluation grows out of several societal forces including accountability, legislative mandate, and genuine interest in program improvement. Providers of funds are demanding that agencies and organizations in both the public and the private sectors of the service delivery system demonstrate the effectiveness of programs: are they doing a "good job" and spending wisely the monies they receive through voluntary contributions or through taxes. As money becomes more scarce, this trend can be expected to intensify. Mandated accountability is now included in most federally legislated programs. A notable illustration is P.L. 94-142 which requires that evaluation procedures be established for educational programs serving handicapped pupils (DHEW-OE, 1977, 121a.146). Program evaluation is viewed as an appropriate mechanism for determining

accountability. In addition to these outside forces toward accountability demanded by funders and legislators, many professionals are increasingly concerned about the benefit to the clientele of the services they provide.

The purposes of this paper are to describe one design used to evaluate educational programs, namely, accreditation/certification, and to describe how this design is applied to the evaluation of educational programs for visually handicapped pupils.

The Accreditation/Certification Design

Two major preliminary steps precede the application of accreditation/certification design to any educational program: the development of standards and of instruments to assess the extent to which the institution meets these standards. The development of standards involves obtaining consensus from the field, i.e., professionals and consumers, about elements in best practice. Standards thus developed may not be ideal; rather they set minimum acceptable levels of performance. Furthermore, obtaining input from the field in this process is time consuming. Major benefits do accrue to those involved, however. Professionals and consumers become more aware of current forces in the field which are related to standards for practice; they benefit from the interchange with others on a common area of interest; and they have an opportunity to view critically prevailing practices.

The development of the self-study instruments is likewise time consuming but usually does not involve the numbers of persons required for the formulation of standards. Critical decisions about the instruments include the most appropriate format to be used; the content to be included; and the most effective procedure for assessing the extent to which the standards are met. The instruments typically include the following:

guidelines for preparing a statement of philosophy and objectives;

format for describing the population being served;

identification of critical elements in the components of the program;

application of the standards to the program components;

evaluation summary; and

plans for program improvement.

With the standards and the instruments for a self-study, an institution can evaluate its program using this design. Typically this involves the following steps if that institution is seeking accreditation/certification:

1. The institution signifies an intent to apply for accreditation or certification from a specific accrediting/certifying body;
2. The staff of the institution engages in a self-study which typically consumes a minimum of six months;
3. A team of professionals and consumers makes an on-site visit to the institution to validate the results of the self-study and prepares a report of its findings;
4. The institution prepares a response to this report;
5. The self-study, the report of the on-site team, and the institutional response are reviewed by the accrediting/certifying agency and assessed on the extent to which the institution meets standards;
6. The accrediting/certifying agency acts on the institution's application for recoginition.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The accreditation/certification design is primarily summative, that is, the evaluation attempts to measure the overall effectiveness of an already developed program (Anderson, et al., 1975). To a degree, it is formative in that is provides information for program improvement. Webster and Stufflebeam (1978) list the following advantages of this design:

it provides feedback for program improvement,

results directly influence the object of the evaluation,

the methodology is well established,

the scope of information obtained is wide,

reports include both strengths and weaknesses,

an appeal process is provided, if an accrediting agency is involved, and

it is a widely implemented design for educational institutions.

To these, we add that benefits accure to personnel involved in the process as a result of their participation in the self-study (Scholl, 1971; Howe and Fitzgerald, 1977). Further, this design does emphasize the qualitative aspects of a program, but this may also be considered a disadvantage.

Disadvantages identified by Webster and Stufflebeam (1978) include:

audiences may be overly confident in the study's validity,

reliability and validity of information are usually unknown,

objectivity is usually in doubt,

intrinsic qualities of an object are overemphasized,

costs to the institution, boch in staff time and financial resources, are high,

safeguards against biased or unqualified evaluators are weak, and

they are vulnerable to political manipulation.

Properly implemented, the process is extremely time consuming. Ideally the self-study should involve the entire staff. However, the benefits of a carefully executed self-study with all staff participating can outweigh this disadvantage.

In addition, the design usually yields little quantitative data that lend themselves to statistical analysis. Finally, the standards and instruments designed for the self-study may not reflect "best practice," they become out of date because of rapidly changing societal forces, and they are not easily and quickly modified

and updated. The process of standards development is time consuming and usually does not lend itself to short-cut procedures.

The general acceptance of this evaluation design in education probably indicates that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Application of the Design to Educational Programs for Visually Handicapped Pupils

The application of the accreditation/certification design to program evaluation of schools and agencies for the visually handicapped is now well established. The activities of the National Accreditation Council of Agencies Serving the Blind and Visually Handicapped (NAC) are summarized by Roberts (1979).

In the 1960's when standards for education were developed by the Commission on Standards and Accreditation of Services for the Blind (COMSTAC, 1966), about half of the school-age visually handicapped children attended residential schools (Jones and Collins, 1966). The trend toward initiating programs in public schools was gaining momentum during that decade, however, and currently the majority of these pupils are now enrolled in day programs. Although portions of the standards and self-study instruments available for residential schools are appropriate to day programs, there is a need for special guidelines and self-study instruments. The project described by Spungin (1979) is one development designed to improve the quality of programs through agreement of professionals in the field on administrative guidelines for program operation. A related effort is the day school project which is described below.

In 1975 the Standards Committee of Association for Education of the Visually Handicapped selected the development of standards for day programs as a priority area and committed some of its funds for this purpose. A survey of teachers of the visually handicapped was conducted to identify instructional areas that should

be available to visually handicapped pupils but are not included in the typical school curriculum. Responses from 42 teachers employed in school districts in Wisconsin, Maryland, Texas and Florida selected these areas which require special emphasis during instructional time in the regular classroom or special instruction:

- Physical Education
  - gross and fine motor
  - movement
  - rhythm and games
- Vocational Training
- Leisure Time and Recreation
- Human Sexuality
- Concept Development
  - spatial relations
  - categorization
  - identification
- Communication
  - Speech
  - Handwriting
  - Braille (readiness and skills)
  - Optacon
  - Typing
- Indepdendent Living
  - Daily Living Skills
  - Social Skills
  - Orientation and Mobility
  - Safety Awareness
- Special Skills
  - Abacus
  - Visual Efficiency Training
  - Sensory Awareness Training
  - Map Reading
  - Reference Materials Skills

The National Study of School Evaluation publishes a series of self-study instruments for regular school programs: Elementary School Evaluative Criteria (NSSE, 1973), Junior High School/Middle School Evaluative Criteria (NSSE, 1970), and Secondary School Evaluative Criteria: Narrative Edition (NSSE, 1975). With

financial support from the National Study of School Evaluation, we conducted a study to determine (1) whether these instruments would be appropriate for day school programs as basic self-study guides and (2) whether a supplement for the special curricular areas would be necessary. One hundred four teachers about equally distributed among the elementary, junior high/middle and secondary level participated in this study.

In general, teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the three instruments. No curricular area, including driver training, was viewed as inappropriate. Needless to say, teachers recommended only the theoretical not the practical portions for driver training.

This part of the study also gathered information from the 104 teachers about the impact of degree of vision and level of intellectual functioning for the curricular areas identified in the preliminary survey. Six curricular areas were considered as vitally important for all or almost all visually handicapped pupils regardless of degree of vision or level of intellectual functioning: daily living skills, leisure time activities, physical education, sensory awareness training, social skills, and visual efficiency training. Abacus, braille, Optacon, and visual efficiency training were the only subject areas considered as exclusively the responsibility of teachers of the visually handicapped; all others were viewed as shared responsibility with regular classroom teachers. A more detailed report of this study may be found in Scholl (1978) and Scholl and Weihl (1978).

On the basis of findings from this study a self-study and evaluation guide for day programs was prepared. The open narrative format of the National Study of School Evaluation instruments (1970, 1973, 1975) was adopted. The guide was designed to be used independently, or as an instrument to accompany the one(s) used by a regular school when applying for accreditation from one of the regional

accrediting agencies or as an instrument used by a residential school conducting a day school component when applying for accreditation from the National Accreditation Council.

Curricular areas are divided into three groupings: instructional areas offered to all pupils, instructional areas typically taught by special personnel, and nonacademic/extracurricular services and activities.

For the instructional areas offered to all pupils, evaluators check those which are taught by the special teacher, those taught in the regular class and those provided in both. The curricular areas include sub-components of communication skills, science/mathematics, social sciences, physical/health education, fine arts, and practical arts.

The special instructional areas which are typically the responsibility of the special education teacher include sub-components of: communication skills (tactile, auditory, and print reading and writing), special aids for teaching (e.g., the abacus), concept development, orientation and mobility training, and independent living.

The nonacademic/extracurricular services and activities are those mandated by P.L. 94-142: counseling, health services, transportation, informal activities (recess, lunch room), recreational activities and clubs.

Conclusion

Visually handicapped students account for about one percent of all the handicapped receiving services under P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 89-313 (HEW-BEH, 1977). Within the total school population, they account for slightly less than .1 percent. It is easy to understand why they are frequently overlooked by school administrators pressured to service the more vocal and numerically larger categorical groups.

Professional personnel working in the area of the visually handicapped are likewise relatively few in number. In many local districts, one professionally trained person, who may not be qualified in the area of the visually handicapped, is expected to provide services to two or three low incidence groups (the physically handicapped, hearing impaired and visually impaired), all with unique or different educational needs. At the state level, administrative and supervisory responsibility for programs for the visually handicapped is often assigned to personnel, not qualified in this area. Inadequate preparation of leadership personnel may easily result in lowered quality of services to pupils in local schools.

These conditions emphasize the need to develop standards for the service delivery system including both day and residential programs and evaluation instruments to assess the quality of educational programs for visually impaired pupils. The application of standards to educational programs, both day and residential through self-study instruments is one way to insure that all visually handicapped pupils will achieve the full educational opportunity goal promised them under P.L. 94-142.

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